Glocal Cultures?
Managing Across Borders

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Abstract[1]
How can a sense of organisation be created and maintained across national and cultural
borders? The globalisation has created the dream for managing companies with a
unifying *"global corporate culture"*. The idea is to incorporate people into a common
mindset; an all-embracing culture that would offset national differences. Through an
ethnographic study of IKEA, the article illustrates how the dream of a strong global
culture is accompanied by the search for local meanings. Hence, culture is not a mere
managerial project for integrating the geographically dispersed organisation. Rather,
culture is an on-going process of making the world meaningful. On the international
arena, companies become multicultural creations, where some meanings are local,
others are global, and yet the organisation in itself is a *glocal* construction.

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Take a look at any large international corporation. A tangled heap of activities, plans, outlets, products and human beings spread over vast geographical areas. A complex network of legal structures along with intertwined production and distribution processes. A messy flow of ideas in the continuous effort to attain global perspectives and local adaptation. How is such a corporation held together? In the international corporation, activities and individuals are separated in space and time. Organising thus involves creating and maintaining a sense of organisation over national and cultural boundaries. How can a sense of organisation be upheld across borders?

The Dream of a Global Corporate Culture

In the very heart of the study of organisations lies a concern for order (see Smircich, 1983). We are constantly involved in the modern project of ordering and organising the world (c.f. Law, 1994). In fact the word "organisation" is in itself a metaphor that creates a sense of order. We talk about different situations as being more or less organised, and management is often described as the art of co-ordinating and integrating organisational activities. Business studies can be regarded as a cavalcade of various integration mechanisms. Common goals, plans, budgets, management styles, etc., constitute an array of managerial measures for creating order and integration in the complex company. One of the more recent tools in this managerial apparatus is the idea of a unifying "corporate culture". The often suggested solution for co-ordinating the geographically dispersed organisation, where chaos or disorder appear as a destructive threat, is a strong "global corporate culture".

The culture as control approach is the dream of a "supra-culture" that holds the organisation together and give it a consistent persona, regardless of where you find the company. A "supra-culture" that works as a social glue, or an unifying umbrella, thereby integrating the diverse activities into a united whole. This is the dream of creating a sense of sharing and togetherness that dissolves and transcends the annoying

peculiarities of different local cultures. It is the dream of a global corporate culture that offsets national differences and creates integration across borders. In the literature on international business, the corporate "supra-culture" is regarded as a new means of control (see e.g. Doz & Prahalad, 1991; Hedlund, 1986; Martinez & Jarillo, 1989). Where traditional bureaucratic or formal control is said to be insufficient in the complex organisation, "corporate culture" appears as the key to success. A new managerial tool, which in an unobtrusive manner, can control not only work tasks but also people's minds. A common "mindset" (see Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1987) that provides the organisation with an all-embracing mentality. Is it feasible or possible, then, to create such a "global culture"? The purpose of this article is to discuss the assumptions underlying the launch of "culture" as a managerial tool in the international setting.

Local or Global?

In anthropological field-work, culture has traditionally been studied in a particular setting; often a distant village, tribe or community. And the setting has generally been regarded as a cultural whole, spatially separated from other "cultures". Hence, culture has come to denote the integrating set of values and meanings of a distinct group. This cultural "closure" has sometimes led to the view of culture as territorially bounded. In the 1970's, when the issue of cross-cultural management became increasingly focused in the area of international business studies, the whole idea evolved around the assumption of cultures being nationally bounded. Each country would thus express different sets of meanings and norms. When people live during long periods of time in the same territorial area, a distinct cultural sharing is developed, and thereby the world is made up of culturally separated "tribes" such as Swedes, Italians, Canadians, etc. In the area of international business, then, much attention has been given to the handling of these cultural differences. And the need for cultural management has given rise to a prosperous business with handbooks, seminars, courses, etc., on the art of avoiding "cultural clashes".

In a world which is said to be primarily local, the dream of strong corporate culture that would erase national differences, is no more than a dream (Laurent, 1986). Instead, the

"local-culture-view" would hold that national cultures differentiate corporations across nations. The international company faces different national contexts, and in the area of cross-cultural management these are assumed to present different national cultures which shape the company culture (see e.g. Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1993; Hofstede, 1985; Laurent, 1986). Thus, the issue for management is to form strategies for local adaptation. Each local entity in the international company is said to be shaped by the local, national culture, and the organisational culture is merely a reflection of the host country's more deeply rooted meanings and values (Hofstede, 1980). Culture is a local business.

On the other hand there is a growing body of literature that argues for the globalisation of cultures (see e.g. Hannerz, 1992; Levitt, 1983; Naisbitt, 1994; Porter, 1986). In a time when people lived their lives rather closed and bounded to a particular geographical setting, the notion of culture as being spatially bounded might have been relevant. But with today's increasing flows of meanings across geographical and cultural borders, culture and meaning systems tend to become less tied to particular spaces (Garsten, 1991; Hannerz, 1988). It is no longer the rule that a person is born, lives, works, marries and dies in the same village, having no or little contact with people in other settings.

We live in a world of globalisation. Cultural differences are rubbed out, and markets are considered to become homogenised. National identities become blurred, and traditional territories are replaced by complex networks of relations. Thanks to cultural technology, such as telecommunications, travel possibilities, internet, television, etc., there is an increasing flow of meanings across borders. In McLuhan's "global village" people can meet and interact regardless of space and time. The global flow of meanings transcends the national borders. We live in a world with a growing number of cosmopolitans: people who are "free from local, provincial or national ideas" (Harris & Moran, 1979), who move easily beyond borders, feeling just as home in Tokyo as in Stockholm. "Eurokids" travel around Europe on their inter-rail passes, speaking the same MTV-English, drinking the same Coke, eating the same hamburgers, and wearing the same jeans, regardless of the national borders. A transnational young generation who is said to

share more values with their soul-mates in various European countries than with other generations in their own home-country. We live in a world where large, international corporations transcend and dissolve national borders in the "coca-colonisation" (Hannerz, 1988) of world markets. In a transnational business community, "merchants of meanings" can with the help of cultural technology impose and spread corporate meanings. In the strive to control the complex company, a co-ordinating culture is exported from the headquarters to the local subsidiaries (Jaeger, 1983). The global corporate culture challenges and replaces our traditional territorial borders. Organisations might thus transcend geographical areas, where the corporate culture is viewed as the key to success..

Towards a Processual View on Culture

As has been shown, the local view and the global view provide us with two different ways of understanding the international company. While in the area of cross-cultural management, culture and meanings are considered to be always local, the focus on corporate culture as a means of control in the international business literature depicts culture as something that can be exported as a global glue. However, I think that both views could well be criticised for being one-sided, and for reducing culture to an over-simplified static variable.

Creating and maintaining a sense of organisation in the international company involves moving between different national contexts, and in the local view on culture these national contexts are regarded as a background variable that shapes organisational meanings. The differentiation of meanings in the international company can thus be explained by the existence of strong national cultures, which are said to be resistant to more recent forms of global manifestations. Here, national cultures are treated as an external explanatory variable and the organisation is seen as a micro-reflection of this background (see Smircich, 1983). Yet the idea of national cultures as a given background could be questioned. Both national cultures and organisations are human constructions, and as such they are changeable and interlinked. Rather than looking at organisations as mere reflections of the national culture, we could just as well say that it

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is the other way around. In other words, national cultures are constituted by organisations and all the meanings that people assign to the nation. I find it hard to think that "national cultures" could be some free-floating meaning systems that are upheld without any influence of the people and organisations that inhabit the nation. Furthermore, the assumption that each state is a culture tends to treat many of the fictional territorial borders in the world as cultural borders. However, in today's world we are experiencing an increasing flow of meanings across borders. As Hannerz (1989:7) points out: *"only if interactions are tied to particular spaces, is culture likewise so"*. Flows of meaning are no longer restricted to a state or a geographical area.

The idea of creating a corporate culture across borders would then perhaps be a feasible project. But still, the notion of a global corporate culture seems to assume that one or a few persons' meanings become everyone's meanings. In the global-corporate-culture-approach there is very often an endeavour to export the headquarters' meanings to the local subsidiaries. Looking at the creation of meanings as a top-down communication ignores the mutual part of sense-making. It neglects the active shaping, rejection or reinterpretation of corporate meanings at all levels of the organisation. Where culture is reduced to a manageable variable, it becomes a top-management project. The "culture" to be shared is made up by the managers' values and norms, and the rest of the organisational members are more or less considered to be passive receivers of a pre-defined "culture". In the functionalist literature, "culture" is treated as a tangible asset which can be transmitted from A to B in a simple sender-receiver relationship. As I will argue in the following, culture is a far more complex process.

The concept of "culture" has been brought into the area of business studies from anthropology. In that original sense culture has often been used to denote "the way of living" of a particular group or tribe. When applied in business studies, however, "culture" is seldom defined. And when it is, the definition is often a long list of features that are said to be cultural. For instance, Kilmann et al (1985:5) define culture as "the shared philosophies, ideologies, values, assumptions, beliefs, expectations, attitudes and norms that knit a community together". Very often the concept of culture is merely used

as a "grab-bag" for all the irrationalities, or soft sides, of the organisation that cannot be explained in the traditional rational business language. However, by proposing the definition of culture as *an on-going process of making the world meaningful* (Salzer-Mörling 1998b), culture becomes a verb rather than a noun. The world in itself has no inherent meaning. Culture is the human processes of creating collective meanings that make the world meaningful. As sense-makers we are constantly constructing a world of meaning and order by assigning meanings to things, events, activities, etc. Organisations can then be regarded as cultural phenomena which are constructed (and deconstructed) in the process of sense-making. As individuals interpret and define their reality in interaction with others, collective understandings and shared views might develop. This implies a dynamic view, rather than a static one, where culture becomes a fruitul perspective for understanding organizing, globally and locally.

From this follows that while the global-local dichotomy tends to reduce culture to either an easily managed and transportable asset or a locally bounded isolated territory, the processual view rather conceptualises culture as an on-going creation. The focus is then moved from the global-local extremes towards the intermediary relationships; the flows of meaning. Culture can thus be understood as an interactive process, where pre-defined meanings from the "top" might be rejected, adopted, recreated or reinterpreted in the on-going process of making the world meaningful. With this revised cultural perspective I shall now try to explore how the organisation becomes constructed when crossing borders and how meanings are created in the tension between the local and the global meaning systems.

An Ethnographic Journey Within Ikea

Even though the dream of a strong "global corporate culture" is widespread, there are few cultural studies of international corporations. Little attention has been given to the processes of sense-making across borders (see Melin, 1992). Most studies of international business appear to be somewhat management-centric, where the focus is put on the strategic formation of managerial values and meanings. During the course of roughly one year, I carried out a study of sense-making across borders in the corporate

setting of Ikea (see Salzer, 1994). Instead of studying culture as a top-management project, my aim was to gain an understanding of the interactive sense-making processes at all levels of the organisation. Since my research focus was concerned with the construction of meanings in the international company, the empirical field-work was largely inspired by the methods used by anthropologists (see e.g. Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992; Rosen, 1991). In contrast to more traditional research approaches handled from the outside, my ambition was to get an inside view of the cultural processes of the international company. Since meanings are created in interactions, studying sense-making means getting involved in those interactions.

Thus, my research approach resembles what anthropologists refer to as "going native" (see e.g. Gregory, 1983); a strategy of immersing oneself into the field of study. Even though I never really became an insider, always being that curious researcher with a tape recorder, I did my best to get immersed into the every-day life at Ikea. I worked at Ikea, I ate at Ikea, I participated in meetings and training programmes at Ikea, and I even dreamed about Ikea at night! I spend some lengthier periods of time in a number of stores in the four different countries, where as a participant-observer I took part in everything from the ordinary work on the floor, at department meetings and during coffee-breaks, to hallway conversations and birthday parties. I also participated in a number of internal training programmes and management meetings at various levels of the company. In addition, I carried out a large number of interviews - mostly tape-recorded - ranging from informal chats to more lengthy discussions with employees in the stores, department managers, as well as corporate managers (see Salzer, 1994).

As an international home-furnishing chain with some 20.000 employees in more than 20 countries, Ikea is an interesting field for exploring the construction of meanings across borders. Since its start in Älmhult in the South of Sweden in the 1940's, Ikea has experienced rapid internationalisation under a Swedish banner, which not only has involved the export of a furniture style but also the export of corporate meanings and values. In order to capture this global dimension of the company, although in a limited way, the field-work was carried out at different Ikea locations in Sweden, Denmark,

Canada and France. In this way the field-work focuses on certain corners of the "Ikea-world"; parts of the global company that represent the central functions in Scandinavia as well as the on-going operations in Europe and North-America. By travelling around in the "Ikea-world" during one year, the aim was to get an in-depth understanding of the local as well as the global flows of meaning making up the international company.

Joining the "Ikea-Family"

"Hi, welcome to Ikea. Here at Ikea we're like a big family…"

I am at the Personnel Department on my first day in a Swedish Ikea home-furnishing store. Entering the small tiny office I get an enthusiastic greeting. Like all new employees I was given the binder "We at Ikea". On the inside of the binder I am welcomed by Ikea's Swedish Service Office, who has produced the cover: *"Welcome! I hope that you soon, very soon, will feel that you are one of the team..."* In the binder there is also a four-coloured copy of an Ikea ad. Beneath the headline, "IKEA's Soul", there is a picture of a billowing verdant field where a long stone fence stretches up towards the dark green forest on the horizon. A stone fence, the text below explains, that is Ikea's backbone. A stone fence that makes Ikea a different company. A stone fence that symbolises Ikea's origins from Småland in the South of Sweden. "We have a soul" the Ikea ad proudly states, as if the company had a distinguishing corporate personality. Later on I found this stone-fence-ad translated, enlarged and framed, decorating a number of walls throughout the "Ikea-world". As an official symbol of the corporate soul which you are supposed to be embraced by as soon as you join the "Ikea family".

Along with the cover I got my set of Ikea clothes: a red shirt, a red sweater, a blue skirt, and a pair of blue trousers. As soon as I started to wear my new Ikea uniform, something surprising happened; everyone I met in the store said "hello!". People I had never seen before said "hi" with a friendly smile where ever I went during my month-long stay in the store. Not only did I look as if I was one of them, sometimes I even felt I had become a member of their "Ikea family". During my study within the "Ikea-world" I continuously ran into Ikeans (they sometimes call themselves that, giving me associations to some creatures from outer space: Ikeans...Martians...) discussing and

defining what made their organisation unique. Relating and enacting what their organisation was all about. I met people who spend large amounts of time and efforts on incorporating people into the official corporate soul, but also people who were making sense of their local Ikea sphere, far away from the "Smålandish" stone fence.

No matter where you visit an Ikea store, they look pretty much the same. The first time I came to an Ikea store outside Scandinavia it felt like coming home. Ikea, as a concept company, is in many aspects a rather standardised company. There are several central solutions that are sent out from Älmhult to Ikea outlets in the periphery. The layout of the stores, the self-service concept, the catalogue, the product range and the official philosophy, are all centrally constructed and defined symbols that are transmitted all over the Ikea-world. Wherever you see Ikea, you are struck by the homogeneity. The stores, the offices, the products, the uniforms, etc., look very much the same whether you are in Älmhult or Toronto. Even the Swedish product names are exported. A "Sörgården" is a "Sörgården", regardless if you are in New York or in Paris (which of course can make the pronunciation of the products you want to order a difficult exercise in the Swedish language).

The globalisation of Ikea is not only an exportation of various material symbols. We can also find ideas and meanings that seem to be collectively held across borders. Even though Ikea is a large and widespread company, the "family" is supposed to embrace everyone. "If you don't fit in - you quit", many Ikea managers often say, and several stories witness of how newcomers who do not fit in are rather quickly pushed out of the family. But once a member of the family, you tend to stick to the "fold", the story goes. Many co-workers at Ikea state that interacting on a first-name basis and the casual dressing style is something they believe is special or typical for Ikea and which is part of the "family-thing". And maybe the family metaphor makes it easier to understand why all traditional family festivities are so thoroughly celebrated at Ikea. Birthdays, weddings, Swedish holidays such as Lucia Day and Midsummer, and of course Christmas. I do not think I have ever celebrated so many birthdays as during my year with Ikea.

A recurrent theme when Ikeans in different countries describe their company is the view of their company as being "different". "We're not like the others". The special so called Ikea spirit as it has evolved in Älmhult has been spread across borders. Hence, features such as "le tutoiment" (the use of the familiar form of "you") at all levels of the company, of not having special lunch rooms for managers, anti-bureaucracy projects, and the "just-do-it" approach, can to a various extent be found all around the Ikea world. Just as the family metaphor creates a sense of we-ness, there are several stories, expressions, and legends within Ikea that contribute to and reinforce the definition of the company as a coherent, and perhaps global, "self".

The Fabrication of Meanings

As I entered the Ikea world, I was overwhelmed by the massive efforts managers undertook for defining and expressing the "sense" of the company to me and other newcomers. The management system provided me with extensive sets of pre-defined meanings of what Ikea was all about. The documents I read, the stories I was told, the "family-activities" I took part in, all seemed to construct a sense of purpose, a sense of we-ness, and a sense of direction. This production and reproduction of myths, metaphors and stories can be characterised as a sort of "fabrication of meanings" (see Salzer, 1994). Even though sense-making is an interactive process, constantly going on at all levels in the organisation, in companies we can find special "culture-makers" (c.f. Ehn & Löfgren, 1982; Kunda, 1992). These are the fabricators of meaning who possess the cultural power for picking up symbols and giving them officially approved signification.

In organisations we find people whose sole purpose is to make culture; to fabricate meanings. As Berger & Luckman (1967) points out, the division of labour in any society leads to a state where some people are freed from "hunting and forging weapons", and can be totally dedicated to the "fabrication of myths". For example, the Department of Human Resources and the Marketing Department in corporations are often involved in the explicit shaping and forming of the "organisational world", both to insiders and

outsiders through the use of slogans, policies, handbooks, training seminars, etc. The role of these persons is to promote and spread certain symbols and meanings; often with the aspiration to integrate and homogenise various meaning systems.

Since the mid-70's, managers at Ikea have rather consciously tried to promote the official definitions of the "corporate soul". Several efforts have been made to promote the "special Ikea spirit". In 1976, the founder of the company, Ingvar Kamprad, wrote his "testament of a furniture dealer". A document of nine theses describing the company philosophy. The reason for writing down this document was that Kamprad was afraid that the company, which had evolved out of his and his closest friends' work, was starting to "lose its heart". As Ikea had grown rapidly and employed new people with different backgrounds, new perspectives and ideas entered the company. Not everyone working in the company could be born in Älmhult! Hence, certain conscious measures were to be taken in order to safeguard the cultural hegemony.

The socialisation of individuals, for instance, is regarded as an important task for those involved in the "management of human resources". Managers and leaders in companies strive to make newcomers share the organisational reality as defined by managers (c.f. Garsten, 1991). Ikea in Älmhult arranges a special training seminar called "Ikea Way" as a week-long seminar for Ikea managers from all over the world. I participated in one of these seminars, which is a week-long total immersion into Swedish, Smålandish and Ikea's culture. Staying at Ikea's own hotel, Ikea Inn, where the rooms are of course furnished with Ikea furniture, eating the special meatballs and salmon at Ikea's restaurant, having a snack in Ikea's bar, and visiting various Ikea functions in Älmhult. Lectures are given on Ikea's history, the corporate philosophy, the human resource idea, etc. On the last day of the intense week, there is a small ceremony at which the participants receive a pin which is a miniature Ikea insert key. This is a token of having become an "Ikea ambassador"; a culture bearer with a licence to spread "Ikea's soul" in his or her own organisation. Some 350 Ikea ambassadors are today acting as missionaries around the world, and in all Ikea stores there are regularly Mini-Ikea-Way seminars for all the co-workers.

In this way, various activities are constantly arranged on a corporate level in order to spread the "Swedish Ikea spirit" across the world and maintain a corporate culture. By selective recruitment, introductory classes, Ikea Way seminars, co-worker handbooks, etc., Ikea managers strive to "keep the family together". Celebrations, Christmas gifts, and the distribution of myths and stories about the "family" are all parts of the fabrication of meanings. Pre-defined meanings from the top are transmitted to co-workers in an effort to reinforce an overall sense of organisation.

When the Centre Speaks, the Periphery Listens…

As Ikea has expanded and become established on foreign markets, symbols have been exported from Älmhult out to the other outlets in the Ikea-world. Ikea, being a very "culture-conscious" company, is highly involved in the fabrication of meanings and the conscious transmission of perspectives. Älmhult has become the centre not only for designing Ikea's product range of home furnishing articles, but also the ideational centre for designing "the corporate soul". From Älmhult there has been a constant export of symbols out to the "Ikea-world". In the international company we can thus see how the centre performs the role of a sense-giver, whereas the periphery is the taker of pre-defined meanings. In this sense, the flows of meanings are often asymmetrical, where the centre is the giver, and the periphery is the taker of meaning and meaningful form. *"When the centre speaks, the periphery listens..."* (Hannerz, 1992:219).

The effort to create a global culture is often a process of fabricating meanings in the centre and exporting meanings to the periphery. This "management of meanings" (Smircich & Morgan, 1982) can be understood as managers' attempts to define the reality for others. The flow of meanings from Älmhult out to the local entities can thus be described as a form of sense-giving (see Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991)., where approved definitions of "what Ikea is all about" are sent out throughout the Ikea-world. By guiding local sense-making and creating global sets of symbols there is a wish to ensure global homogeneity. There is a form of "cultural imperialism" in this flow of meaning,

or as Van Maanen & Laurent (1993) put it: the company strives to "replicate itself wherever is goes".

Due to the global flow of symbols, within Ikea we can see various sets of meanings and a sense of sharing that appear to transcend geographical and cultural borders. The descriptions of Ikea as an unconventional, informal and different company reappear at many different sites. And the family metaphor and the "special Swedish style", are recurrent traits in many Ikeans collective definitions of the company. People at Ikea are not only legally kept together in a complex corporate structure, but regardless of where you are they also refer to themselves as being a part of Ikea. Still, however, the "Ikea" stands for many different things in different settings. It is a label, a name, under which we can find several meanings. Let us therefore take a look at what happens in the periphery.

Local Cultures

So far I have talked about Ikea almost as if it was "one organisation", and of a sense of "we-ness" on an overall level. As if there was one set of meanings, embraced by everyone. And maybe that was my naive view of Ikea as I started my journey in the Ikea-world. Bengt, an Ikea-manager in Canada, abruptly alerted me:

> *"You talk about Ikea all the time, as if there was somebody somewhere knowing everything and making decisions. As some omnipotent 'Ikea'. But Ikea is us, we who work right here...to us Ikea is Ikea Canada. I don't know what's going on in Europe or in the rest of the Ikea-world..."*

At the same time as there appear to be strong forces towards globalisation of meanings, we can also find a heterogenisation of meanings. In any large organisation we can probably see various differentiating forces. The division of work, hierarchical structures, organising around different tasks and functions, geographical location, etc., all contribute to a heterogenisation. In complex organisations it is hardly the rule that *"all members face the same problem, everyone communicates and all share a common set of understandings"* (Van Maanen & Barley, 1985).

And throughout my study within Ikea it became clear to me that there was not one sense of sharing. Rather, each local setting or each local sphere tend to be a "breeding ground" where shared meanings develop (c.f. Louis, 1985). Even though much of the flow of meanings is from the centre to the periphery, the periphery is not a mere listener. The "periphery" is in itself an active constructor and shaper of meanings (see Salzer-Mörling, 1998a). During my stay at Ikea in France there is an on-going discussion about the official meanings. To many of the French Ikeans it appears as "going the French way" has led to a deviation from what they perceive as the "Ikea-culture". *"Ikea is becoming more like the others"* was a common description. The family metaphor, for instance, was constantly questioned:

> *"When you start here, they tell you that it's like a big family...yeah, they told me that is was a big family, but ehhm, to me, it's not a family any longer, as it was before. It's just what the say, but really, it isn't..."*
>
> Eric, a co-worker in a French Ikea-store.

The family-metaphor is thus widely spread, but stands for different thing in different settings. In the Ikea family, Ingvar Kamprad is the unquestioned "Daddy". It is a rather patriarchal family. Funny enough, it seems as the larger geographical distance from Sweden, the more distant relationship the Ikeans have with Kamprad. If Kamprad is called "Daddy" in the Swedish stores, in France he is referred to as "Papi" (grandfather), while in Canada he is seldom mentioned. Another example of the local reinterpretation of the Swedish symbols was expressed in the use of the familiar form of you (le tutoiment). Even though all French Ikeans said "tu" in their conversations, thereby performing the image of being "cool" and informal, many of them preferred to say "vous" to their bosses if they would run into them outside working hours.

In the beginning of my journey in the Ikea-world, to me all the different local interpretations stood out as deviations from the "real" Ikea. But after awhile I began to realise that the pluralistic use and creation of symbols in fact is what constitute the company. During my stay in North America, for instance, it became clear that the very

Ikea-concept had been recreated and changed into something new. Whereas Ikea in Sweden (and in the rest of Europe) has been built up around the idea of "mechanical selling", where the customer should be able to handle his purchase without any help from the "red-shirts", Ikeans in Canada kept talking about Ikea as the "Mecca of Customer service". People I worked with in the Swedish Ikea store talked most of the time about the products, and "taking care of the products". Ikeans in Canada on the other hand defined their mission as "taking care of the customers". And everywhere on the walls and billboards in the staff areas in the Canadian store, there were big signs with commanding messages: *"You are just about to meet the most important person in your life - our customer!"*, and *"Our customers are really important - they make pay-days happen!"* So, before you go out on the "stage" in the store, put on your smile and make the customer happy! There was even a special customer service award in the North-American store. Each month an employee was elected "the best customer service employee" and awarded a watch and an golden inscription on a wood panel. All this "gold and wood" did to me stick out as symbols very distant from the Swedish Ikea-way of being cost-conscious and not profiling the individual. In the customer service idea à la North America, the so called periphery does no longer appear as a passive reciever of a centrally defined concept. Rather, the Ikea in North America stands out as an active constructor of local symbols and meanings.

Customer Service à la North America could be used as one example for illustrating the geographical differentiation of meanings. People at Ikea outlets in different countries come to create and share a world of their own. "To us Ikea is Ikea Canada". Ikea Canada is not the same thing as Ikea Sweden. Having no or little face-to-face contacts with the rest of the "Ikea-world", Ikea to Ikeans in Canada is Ikea Canada. And the same goes for France and for Sweden. Whereas many of the myths and stories that circulate within Ikea in Sweden bear witness of a definition of the company as being crazy, unconventional and "just-do-it", Ikeans in Canada more often talk about themselves in terms of "professional". Many Canadian Ikea managers held that the Swedish "naive farm-boy attitude" dressed in the tie-less jeans-and-rolled-up-sleeves approach was not

considered to be serious on the Canadian market. So, "professional" has become the key-word.

Just as there are varying meanings within Ikea on what Ikea stands for, the meaning of the company on the market also varies. On an overall level, Ikea is often viewed as a "funny, youthful and different" home furnishing company: an image very similar to the "fun and crazy" company promoted in Ikea's ad and store activities. But while in Sweden Ikea has become a sort of institution; a taken-for-granted and not too exciting part of the Swedish "folkhem", in France the company is regarded as something very trendy and modern, whereas in Canada for many people Ikea is perhaps too modern and exotic for their more traditional "brownish" taste. The images, constituting a sort of mirror for the self-view (see e.g. Christensen, 1991; Salzer, 1994), vary across nations, thereby contributing to and confirming the varying local meanings.

Local Spheres of Meaning

However, we don't need to draw borders between nations to find differences in meanings and varying cultures. Each local world within the company - a store, an office, a department, etc. - are settings where face-to-face contacts are frequent, thus enabling organisational members to meet and interact. In the stores, for example it was often shown to me how the physical distance between those working on the upper floor and the lower floor created different characterisations of themselves. *"They who work upstairs are different - they think they are little bit finer than us..."* And in each store they talk about themselves as a unique Ikea store. *"We're not like the Stockholm store - they are not like us. They don't have the same spirit, they're too big"*. The local store becomes the local world where meanings are created and recreated.

Within Ikea, as in most companies, there is also a vertical differentiation of meanings. Different hierarchical levels might share specific views of the organisation, and various positions and categories in organisations are assigned various meanings. Those who I have called the fabricators of meanings, i.e. many of the central corporate managers in Älmhult, are those who construct and spread the for-public-consumption identity; the

official definition of the soul. They share a set of meanings which becomes constructed on management meetings, in writing down policies and guidelines, etc. Sometimes they are referred to as the "fundamentalists"; the original Älmhult-gang who firmly clinches to the old stone-fence!

Local spheres of meaning need not to be geographical. Thus, "local" is for me not necessarily a term for belonging to a certain territorial place, but rather it can be a certain space of meanings independent of physical location. The nation, the industry, the profession, the department, etc., can then be understood as different local spheres in which organisational meanings become created. And these spheres are a part of organisational members' self-views; of how they define themselves as a group. "We're a retail company", "We're Swedish", "We're ikeans", etc., are all examples of how the local spheres are used as definitions of the world. Within big organisations there are likely to be many such different meaning systems, where organisational members are related to several spheres at the same time. Hence, organisational meanings seem to vary across borders, where the creation, negotiation and interpretation of various symbols take place within different spheres.

"Life-Style à la Älmhult"

The "periphery" is not a mere listener or receiver of pre-defined meanings. Despite the strong efforts for homogenising meanings, we can see how within the Ikea-world, local entities develop local sets of meanings. Symbols are interpreted in local settings. Meanings are adopted, rejected, recreated and reinterpreted throughout the organisation in the on-going cultural processes. Hence, within the company we can find multiple sets of meanings. Ikea, for instance, is no longer a "purely Swedish" company. What from the beginning was a small Älmhult-centred company has, today, become a cross-border arena for multicultural manifestations. Meanings from entities abroad begin to mix with the Swedish hegemony. Even though Ikea still has a very "Swedish style", the other countries within the Ikea Group are now beginning to make their voices heard. The direction of the flows of meaning within the Group changes. New meaning systems evolve.

At Ikea, customer service à la North America and the widening of the product range towards a more international taste, appear as impulses from the periphery that change the meanings in the centre. Looking at the Ikea product range of today we can find Carl Larsson with a touch of Provence. Swedish modernity with a flavour of English cottage And the Ikea way of doing things is today a mixture of Älmhult "doers" and North American "professionalism". Etc... *"Lifestyle à la Älmhult"* implies multiple meanings, where "pure" meanings from the centre are mixed with locally produced meanings into a new blend of cross-border creations! In an Ikea Way seminar I attended in Älmhult, an American Ikea manager concluded after a week of total immersion into Swedish culture:

> *"We talk a lot about Ikea's culture as being Sweden, Småland...But another part of the Ikea culture is the international part...that we, people from all over the world meet and interact...we mix together and create something."*

The Glocal Organisation

Maybe the international organisation is best understood as a mixture of global symbols and local ones. Meanings are mingling, mixing and interacting. In large, complex organisations we can find both a homogenisation and a heterogenisation of meanings. "Cultural technology" allows sense-making to take place across borders. With new means of communication, people in organisations can come to interact and share global definitions of the organisational world, and the fabricators of meaning actively promote an all-embracing definition of the organisation in order to *homogenise* different meaning systems into an integrated whole. At the same time, the pre-fabricated meanings are not simply transferred from headquarters to subsidiaries. Even though corporate symbols easily can be globally exported thanks to modern communication technologies, the meanings assigned to these symbols seem to be locally shaped. As organisational members make sense in various local spheres, meanings become *heterogenised.*

Thus, I think that in the process of organising two processes can be identified as co-existing and counter-acting all the time: the heterogenisation and homogenisation of

meanings, and the search for constructing local and global meaning systems. In the area of cross-cultural management, culture and meanings are considered to be always local (see e.g. Hofstede, 1991; Laurent, 1986)., which makes it extremely hard to understand how any company ever could transcend national or cultural borders. On the other hand, when culture is considered to be a "global glue" (see e.g. Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1987; Hedlund, 1986), the local spheres making up this global contruction seem to vanish into some kind of transcendental "whole". Those who study culture as being local, tend to ignore the power aspects by which flows of meaning are shaped and homogenised The global view on culture on the other hand tends to neglect the local spheres and the mutual part of sense-making

Hence, to understand sense-making and the construction of organisations across borders, we must embrace both the local and the global flows of meaning in organisations. I would argue that there is a constant interaction between the homogenisation process, with the fabrication of meanings from the centre, and the heterogenisation process, with locally constructed meanings. Pre-defined meanings from the top are interpreted, rejected or adopted at all levels of the organisation. And new meanings are also created locally, in local spheres of meaning. There are certain centres and peripheries in a hierarchical relationship in the creation and distribution of meanings in organisations. Over time, however, in the international organisation, this centre-peripheral relationship becomes less clear (see Forsgren, 1990). In a world where flows of meaning can transcend cultural and geographical borders, meanings are increasingly mixed. And the relations between centre and periphery change. There are no mere givers and no mere takers.

Are there any "pure" forms of global or local systems of meaning? Is there one sense of organisation? In the complex organisation, operating as it does, in various local spheres, organisational culture may well be best understood as an array of meaning systems, where different views meet and interact. But if we want to understand how the international organisation at the same time becomes homogenised and heterogenised, I think we must abandon the idea of culture as being a place or a territory. Culture is

neither a global village nor a local arena. Rather, culture is a flow of symbols and meanings. But even though the flow might transcend various borders in its global extension, no matter where we try to understand the flow we will always get a local understanding. As Latour (1991:117) puts it: "Even the longest network remains local at all points". As a complex network, the international organisation reproduces itself by interlinking various spheres of meanings across borders. In this moving interconnectedness, symbols can travel along the network; always local but still on the move. If we had only the nodes, the local points, a phenomenon such as Ikea wouldn't exist. It would be impossible to transport symbols from Älmhult to Toronto. On the other hand, if we had no local points, the network wouldn't exist. The network is in this sense *glocal*. The global flows and local spheres are not mutually exclusive; rather they presuppose each other.

In the perspective on international organisations that I have been arguing for, culture is not a mere managerial project for offsetting differences. Rather culture is an on-going process of sense-making, globally and locally. Culture is a constant struggle for defining the world, where in fact the dynamics in corporate development lie in the multiplicity of meanings, the cross-cultural intersections and mixtures. In the effort to achieve a globally integrated organisation lies, very often, an ambition to incorporate the different meanings and divergent views into a common mindset. Culture as the attempt to manage the minds and hearts of organisational members, is a dream of creating a homogenous whole that downplays or even neglects the multifarious aspects of organisational life. But how many new ideas are constructed in the single-minded organisation? Instead of looking at the international organisation in terms of cultural integration or differentiation, I would argue that our companies of today can be understood as expressing both. On the international arena, companies becomes multicultural creations, where some meanings are local, others are global, and yet the organisation in itself is a glocal construction. The challenge for managers in a glocal world is thus not how to create a cultural whole or how to differentiate into locally adapted parts. The challenge for managers is rather to replace an ethnocentric aspiration for homogenising meanings, with the creative process of promoting and interlinking the

multicultural spheres of meanings into a moving interconnectedness. Maybe it is in accepting and nourishing this mingling of meanings where creativity, progress and change are to be found?

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